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As told to Shy Watson, 2012 words.

Tags: Writing, Failure, Process, Promotion, Day jobs, Time management.

On approaching publicity as a way of building community

Writer Kate Brody discusses the secrets of publishing, building community, and advocating for yourself. *Rabbit Hole* feels like a cautionary tale. Is it?

The internet part of it, for sure. I don't feel like the internet's done a lot of great things for the way we communicate and experience relationships. In the book, being online allows Teddy to withdraw into herself and feed her paranoia.

I was off social media for a really long time and only rejoined to promote the book. I feel my brain changing when I'm more online in that A, I feel so addicted to my phone and B, I am hyper aware of what everyone else is doing all the time.

It's obviously a mixed bag though. I don't want to be too moralizing about it.

It's interesting to know that you yourself have been off social media and now that you're back in, you're like "nope."

It was fine for the first couple months. It's a very useful tool, in publishing, to connect with other authors and build community, but it's hard for me to imagine creating new work while being online in this way. It's just too noisy. Too many voices, too much information. I'm not built for it. I kind of doubt anyone is built for it. I miss not knowing things about people. I miss showing up to an event, and I haven't talked to that person since the last time I talked to them.

Fair. *Rabbit Hole* goes deep into true crime, Reddit communities, et cetera. It seemed really well researched. What is your relationship to research while you're writing?

I'm not huge on research. I tend to not want to get bogged down if the project has a lot of momentum. I did explore Reddit though. I was curious about the site. I was teaching at the time that I wrote *Rabbit Hole*. All these high school kids were on Reddit, and it felt like a generational shift. I had associated the site with these dark, conspiratorial communities, but then I started using it in earnest. It's a pretty neutral and kind of retro platform in a lot of ways. It will just connect you to your people. If you're very into misogyny then you can absolutely find a bunch of people who are like-minded. But I used it for pregnancy related stuff or publishing stuff; it will just give you whatever you want. So it is neutral in the sense that many parts of the internet just amplify your own desires. If you're uniting a group of people who have very fringe beliefs and desires and amplifying that, there's potential danger.

The true crime thing, I had been a consumer. It felt for a while everyone was watching true crime and that was sort of the water cooler with *The Staircase* and *The Jinx* and whatever.

And then I noticed a drop-off in production. Everything just started to feel a little bit flimsier and more fictional. It felt unlikely to me that all these real life tragedies would take on a very familiar narrative arc, so I wanted to write a book that did the opposite. What if I wrote fiction that was as messy and incoherent as real life tragedy instead of forcing these real life tragedies to fit this very satisfying narrative shape?

What's the secret to writing suspense?

That was the toughest part. I wrote a book in my MFA that was just like an MFA book, like this really long

sort of plotless book, and then I figured, okay, I've always been a reader of crime fiction as well as literary fiction and maybe I can use that as a shape for a second book to try to propel the plot forward. But I found it really, really tough. My impulse as a writer is always to slow down and spend time with the characters, to let them wander around a room, but you can't really do that with crime fiction. So I had to cut a lot.

I found that I needed to be surprised by where the story was going for the reader to feel surprised by it. I needed to feel some sense of discovery while I was writing it. When you're editing it, obviously you know where it's going, but if there wasn't that energy in a scene the first time, I couldn't engineer it after the fact.

What happened with your MFA book?

I sent it out to agents, it got a lot of really nice nos. They were all along the same lines, "we like the characterization, we like the language, but there's just no plot. It's moving too slowly." The book was very long, and it took place over 30 years. There was nothing "propulsive" about it. I still like it. I wish I didn't like it, but I do, and I am kind of trying to see if I can take those characters and rework the story, knowing what I know now having written *Rabbit Hole*. I still don't know if the problem is that it's not good or that it's not saleable.

That reminds me of how Ottessa Moshfegh, after writing *McGlue*, was like, "Okay, I need to write something marketable," and then she wrote *Eileen*, a thriller.

Yeah, that interview was sort of a revelation to me too. I remember reading it and being like, "Oh, okay." She's a serious literary writer, but I related to everything she was saying and thought it was what a lot of us think but don't say. At the time I was writing *Rabbit Hole*, I was pregnant with my oldest, and I was really worried that if I failed twice, if I wrote two manuscripts and couldn't find an agent for them, couldn't get them all the way to publication, I would quit. I wouldn't keep doing it. I was worried it would start to seem insane to take time away from my kids or money-making activities to write a third book when the market had clearly spoken.

Moshfegh was very explicitly chasing something commercial, but her style is so odd and so specific, and so she couldn't help but write a book that is still kind of crackling with all this weird energy. You are who you are in whatever form the book takes. So I think that was very permission-giving, especially after coming out of an MFA program where genre fiction was not taken seriously.

How was your MFA experience? You went to NYU, right?

Yeah. It was fine. I went right out of undergrad, which I don't really recommend. I think I should have maybe taken a couple years, although I don't know, knowing myself I probably just would've never done it at that point. I had a really lovely experience with my undergraduate writing cohort, and I went into MFA doe-eyed, thinking it was going to be the same thing, just all love. I found it a little tough. I was so green and I believed everything everyone said about my writing, but I got to work with some amazing people.

I got full funding, but I couldn't afford to live in New York so I was working as an assistant all day and then I'd run to my classes at night, take my classes for three hours, and go back to work at nine the next morning. So when people are like, "Oh, the gift of an MFA is time," it was probably the least time I've ever had to write in my whole life.

Now that you're out of the MFA, what does your work entail on the day-to-day?

I work pretty fast, so I've taken the pressure off myself in terms of "you've got to be in the chair for this many minutes a day, or you've got to get this many words done." It's not realistic given that I have a five-year-old and a two-year-old and there are just days that's not going to happen. But when I get the chance to write, I know I'll take it. There's nothing else I want to do. When I was younger I definitely felt like I had to force myself to write. It was like working out. It was like, "Oh, you've got to go work out because it's getting grim." Now I find if I have an hour, all I want to do is get back into the project.

What's something that you wish someone would've told you when you began writing?

I always struggle with these kinds of questions because on the one hand, there's a lot of stuff I didn't know, and on the other hand I wonder if I knew them it would have been too dispiriting. If someone had found me senior year of college when I was writing all these stories and said "it'll take you 10 years to publish a book," that would've sounded like a crazy amount of time to me.

As far as publishing goes, I don't know that you need to know it all when you start writing a book, but there is a lot of publishing specific knowledge that feels sort of kept secret. I've been lucky to connect with other writers who are really open about their process and the financial side of it, because that can be hard to navigate. There's a sense in which you have to totally take the reins and make your publishing experience what you want it to be.

How does one do that?

I think even with writers who are getting huge advances (not me), there's an enormous amount of DIY going into it, an enormous amount of networking and reaching out to people and creating community.

It's important to be a little pushier than is comfortable. If there's a sort of out-of-the box idea you want to pursue, you might have to take the lead on that.

Everyone is out there promoting their own books like it's a second job. I don't think it's a good thing, but that is the world, unless you are maybe Ottessa Moshfegh or Emma Cline. You have to put in a good 6-12 months.

What has been your approach to publicity?

If you're earnestly trying to help other people and build community, that pays dividends in all kinds of ways. In the year leading up to *Rabbit Hole's* publication, I interviewed other writers for different publications and did things where I was like, "okay, what will help me understand how the publicity process works and also allow me to be useful to somebody else?" And all of those experiences were really positive. I met writers who became friends and now we're peers who do events together. Whenever you're approaching publicity from this mercenary perspective of "I need this number of reviews" or whatever, it just feels awful. There is a lot of really lovely reciprocity within the writing community and plenty of people who are excited to connect with fellow writers whose work resonates with their own.

I learned from your Instagram that pre-order sales go toward first week sales and can affect whether one becomes a bestseller. I didn't know that until you posted it.

I had to ask Allie Rowbottom the other day, "Does anyone ever tell you how your book is selling?" People keep asking me how it's selling, and I have no idea. Not only do I have no idea, I don't know if I'll ever know. No one has said, "in six months we're going to tell you." I find that other writers are happy to talk about their publicity, their advances, their sales, and the information they've learned along the way if you ask them because they've been in this position too.

Kate Brody recommends:

Tomato candles

The poetry collection Field Music by Alexandria Hall

Letters to Wendy's by Joe Wenderoth

Lisa Sorgini's photographs

Fancy butter

Name

Kate Brody

Vocation

author

Fact

Annabel Graham

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